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ABSTRACT

The kinds of persons the creative person sees as mentors and the roles mentors play in helping the creative person achieve his/her creative endeavors were studied. Ninety adults (40 males and 50 females) were identified as creative by graduate students registered for a course entitled "Creativity: Gifted and Talented." The adults ranged in age from young adults to retired persons. The creative adults were interviewed by the graduate students. Particular emphasis was placed on determining who was helpful in the adults' pursuit of creative endeavors, and the forces that blocked or stifled their creative ability. Content analysis was undertaken to code the information in percentages and numerical terms. The most frequent source of support identified was the family: 61 percent listed one or more family members as mentors. Thirty-three percent credited one or more teachers with enhancing the development of their creativity. Support provided by family members included providing experiences, instilling confidence, setting an example, tutoring, developing individuality, and developing security. Support provided by educators included giving special attention, instilling confidence, giving positive feedback, and using unusual teaching methods. (Author/SW)

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The Mentor: Who Encourages the Creative Person?

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The Mentor: Who Encourages the Creative Person?

A recently published bibliography suggests numerous studies involving mentoring (Noller and Frey, 1983). Few of the studies related to the system of support for the creative person in particular. Torrance reports (1983, p. 8) a longitudinal study in which having a mentor was found to be significantly correlated with four criteria of adult achievements. However, Torrance supports the view of Hutson (1981, p. 28) that the support systems of creative persons have often been ignored.

This study reports the kinds of persons the creative person sees as mentors and the roles mentors play in helping the creative person achieve his/her creative endeavors. Subjects included 90 adults identified as creative by graduate students registered for a course entitled, "Creativity: Gifted and Talented." Subjects were interviewed by the graduate students. While a number of questions were asked, the particular questions analyzed for this study were: "Who helped you to pursue your creative endeavors?" and "What forces blocked or stifled your creative ability?"

Content analysis was used to code the information. Coding was reported in percentages and numerical terms. Subjects most often credited family members (61%) and educators (33%) as mentors. Support provided by family members included providing experiences, instilling confidence, setting an example, tutoring, developing individuality, and developing security. Support provided by educators included giving special attention, instilling confidence, giving positive feedback, and using unusual teaching methods.

Whether the catalyst in encouraging creative ability is referred to culturally as a mentor, patron, sponsor, or guru, numerous observers have indicated that almost always, whenever independence and creativity occur and persist, there is some other person who acts as a facilitator (Noller and Frey, 1983, p. 1). According to E. Paul Torrance (Frey and Noller, 1983, p. 60), in every age and in every culture, the relationship described by the terms referred to above has accompanied creative success.

Noller (1982) reminds us that although it is evident that for centuries the concept of mentoring has been an accepted route toward success, little has been written about it until the last 15 or 20 years. Very few references to mentoring appear in the literature before those of Ralph M. Statgill (1968) who discussed mentoring as a form of leadership training.

A recently published annotated bibliography suggests numerous studies about mentors (Noller and Frey). The studies reported expose a wide variety of commentaries, professional reports, and case studies related to mentoring. While the bibliography is not an exhaustive list of literature on the subject, it does report material related to 17 major focus areas including career choices and development, education, learning, leadership, and women. A survey of the numerous studies listed reveals very few studies related to the way in which creativity per se was encouraged or developed through the mentor relationship. Those studies that focused on education and gifted and talented mainly described programs designed to utilize a mentor for students' areas of

interest and expertise. Those studies regarding mentoring in general are useful; but again, they do not relate to the creative person in particular and the way in which he/she perceives the mentor and the mentoring relationship.

E. Paul Torrance (Noller, 1983, p. 1) submits that "discussions about the importance of mentors' creative achievement have been based upon the analysis of biographies and autobiographies of high-achieving notably creative people, intensive case studies, or as a part of psychometric studies of eminent scientists. Earlier studies have not used 'having a mentor' as a statistical predictor of creative achievement and have not sought to study empirically the characteristics, functions, development, termination and persistence of mentor relationships."

Torrance (1983, p. 8) reports the results of a 22-year longitudinal study he conducted of 212 young adults. In summary, he concludes that having a mentor was found to be significantly correlated for four criteria of adult creative achievement. He continues to substantiate the importance of the mentor's relationship. He also reports the differences in the kind of mentors utilized by women versus those utilized by men. In general, it appears that:

> The mentor encourages and supports the mentee in expressing and testing his/her ideas and in thinking through things. He/she helps the other learn how to "play his/her game" and to find courage to walk away from the games others try to impose. He/she may protect the individual from the reactions of peers and/or superiors long enough for the creative individual to try out ideas and modify them. He/she can keep the structure of the situation open enough for originality to occur and persist...

Torrance admits that this pioneering study conducted by him reveals both the promise of and the need for such work. This view seems to be supported by others. Hutson (1981, p. 28) reported that "the systems of support, both personal and professional, of creative persons have often been ignored." According to Hutson: "The need is for investigations to be more attentive to the personal lives of creators, to avoid the tendency to regard them as solitary Titans, struggling in a world empty of family, friends, and enemies."

This study makes a contribution in reporting the kinds of persons the creative person sees as mentors, and the roles mentors play in helping the creative person achieve his/her creative endeavors. The study approaches the role of the mentor from a personal point of view. How do individuals identified as creative perceive those who helped them develop their creative ability? What specific roles did these individuals play?

Method

The subjects used for this study included 90 individuals (40 males and 50 females) in the general population whom graduate students identified as creative. The graduate students were registered for a course entitled, "Creativity: Gifted and Talented." Subjects used for this study were those adults identified by the interviewer, from the information obtained through the interview, as possessing average or above average creative ability. Subjects ranged in age from young adults to retired persons.

While a number of questions were asked, the particular questions analyzed for this study were: "Who helped (encouraged) you to pursue your creative endeavors?" or "What forces blocked or stifled your creative ability?" The interviewing technique used allowed the subjects to respond in any way the interviewer saw fit. Not all initial answers to the questions were pursued further by the interviewers. As a result, some subjects were either not encouraged to elaborate upon their initial response or did not elaborate. The initial responses to the questions were accepted and recorded. Some subjects listed only one mentor and/or blocking agent while others listed several.

Data Collection and Analysis

Graduate students were given an assignment to interview a person they saw as creative. The interview assignment came after students were exposed to studies involving the personality characteristics of creative people, and the philosophy related to the "wide-spread kind of creativeness which is the universal heritage of every human being..." espoused by Abraham H. Maslow (1968). The assignment read as follows:

> 1. Write a statement which describes a creative person. Write this statement in your own words without reference to material on "characteristics of the creative person" listed in the course bibliography.
>
> 2. Check your statement against those given in the course bibliography. Write a paragraph designed to compare your statement with that in the basic source--how do the statements differ?
>
> 3. Make a list of the five characteristics you feel are most important in describing a creative person.

4. Identify a person you consider creative. The person you identify must possess at least five of the characteristics we have studied. Interview the person you have selected to determine whether or not your initial impression of your subject is confirmed. What personality characteristics of the creative person does your subject possess? (Interview questions will be discussed in class.)

5. Summarize your interview. Is your subject more creative than you initially supposed, about as creative, or less creative? Qualify your decision by citing at least five examples from the interview that support your conclusions.

Content analysis was used to code the information in the 90 interviews of people identified as creative. Coding in response to the specific questions referred to previously was reported in percentages and numerical terms. In addition to focusing on the particular questions used for this study, the entirety of each interview was read to glean additional information relative to the mentor and his/her role.

Results

The greatest source of encouragement that was suggested related to that which comes from other people. These responses were categorized into two major sources of encouragement: family, and teachers and/or educators. Other sources indicated were friends and peers, and employers.

The most frequent source of support identified was that which comes from the family. Sixty-one percent of the subjects listed one or more family members as mentors. More females (66%) than males (55%) listed family members.

Fifty percent of the subjects credited either the family in general or one or both parents as mentors. Both parents were

identified by 14 percent of the subjects. Nineteen percent listed their mother as a source of encouragement, while 12 percent listed their father. A greater percentage of males (20%) than females (10%) listed both parents as influential. More males (22%) than females (16%) listed their mother; and more females (14%) than males (10%) listed their father.

Four subjects identifying one parent as a catalyst listed the other parent as a determent. Eleven percent of the subjects listed one or both parents as being a hinderence to the development of their creativity.

Eighteen percent of the subjects listed their spouse as a catalyst supporting their creative endeavors. More females (22%) than males (12%) gave their spouse credit. Three subjects listed their spouse as a block or determent to their creativity.

Other family members listed included grandparents, aunts, and siblings.

Twenty-six subjects elaborated as to how family members helped to encourage their creative ability. Other subjects simply credited family members but did not explain how encouragement was offered. An analysis of the comments of those subjects who elaborated revealed six main ways in which family members acted as mentors. These are reported as follows:

1. Provided Experience/Opportunities/Activities/Materials/Time, Etc.

   Twelve subjects specified contributions in this area. Contributions included opportunities to travel, visits to

museums, summer school experiences, provision for learning special skills or stimulating special talent, providing necessary materials and spending time with the subject. One subject stated:

> ...She bought me my very first set of paints. Once when she was working...the people that she worked for bought Venetian blinds for their windows. She brought home all the old oil cloth blinds, washed them for me and made me canvasses.

2. Instilled Confidence/Provided Freedom

Eleven subjects made comments in this area. Illustrative comments are as follows:

> ...Family gave me confidence and faith. They taught me not to be scared because they're always there, they seemed to love me no matter what.
>
> ...gave me faith in my intelligence and ability to make money, which has increased my belief in myself.
>
> ...never criticized me; in other words, everything was terrific. That gives you self assurance...telling one it's terrific gives strong self assurance and a strong ego that'll get you through anything...if you support, it's more valuable than any form of criticism.

3. Admired/Emulated

Ten subjects made comments indicating the admiration they felt for a member or members of their family who encouraged their ability to be creative. Illustrative statements are as follows:

> My mother was in theater. I watched her act and acted myself. I even planned to be a director myself.
>
> My father had many abilities. He was a thinker--always into many things. He had many, many interests. He could accomplish very intricate detailed projects and things seemed to come to him naturally. I admired him.

4. Tutored/Taught

Nine subjects referred to family members as tutors or teachers. Comments ranged from specific instructions such as how to play the banjo and sing to inculcating problem solving skills. Illustrative comments are as follows:

> Mother taught me something new each day...
>
> Father never allowed me to give one solution to a problem. He was constantly playing the devil's advocate to help me find alternatives.
>
> Father told stories to us all the time. We told them, too. If we didn't know one, he told us to make one up...

5. Developed Individuality

Although several of the techniques family members used may be considered related to the development of individuality, five subjects specified contributions made to their creative ability in this area. Illustrative comments are as follows:

> ...supported my independence and encouraged me to personalize myself.
>
> ...let me go with my interests and curiosities unrestricted. I was very fortunate.

6. Developed Security

Again, several techniques used by family members may be considered closely related to the development of security. Four subjects, however, made direct reference to this area. The following comment is illustrative of such support.

> There were strong love feelings in the family. I always felt wanted and needed. There were no insecurities from home life and that is the most important thing.

Thirty-three percent (33) of the subjects credited one or more teachers as enhancing the development of their creativity. More males (45%) than females (22%) listed school personnel. Teachers at all levels were identified. Fifteen subjects specified the educational level of the teachers listed. The most frequent level specified was the college level. Eleven subjects credited teachers in general and nine subjects identified particular subject matter teachers. One subject specified a Sunday School teacher; two subjects specified high school counselors; and three subjects listed particular educational systems, that is, British education, American educational system, and a creative problem solving course. Ten subjects indicated that education/teachers had inhibited them creatively.

Fifteen subjects elaborated as to how teachers/education had helped to encourage their creative ability. Other subjects simply credited teachers/education but did not explain how encouragement was offered. An analysis of the comments of those subjects who elaborated revealed four main ways in which teachers acted as mentors. These are reported as follows:

1. Special Attention

   Ten subjects referred to acts teachers performed that showed interest in the student that went above and beyond the teaching act, or found the teacher giving extra time, talent, money, etc. Specifically, the teacher "listened," "gave extra time," "prodded," "showed special interest," "shared his/her

home," "taught information beyond classroom instruction," and "acted as a patron by sending me to art school."

2. Instilled Confidence

Seven subjects suggested approaches educators used to instill confidence in them. One subject stated:

> We talked about many things and she had hope in me. She was the beginning, she listened, she got me into art school and that is my debt to her.

3. Positive Feedback

Five subjects referred specifically to positive feedback given by their teachers. These teachers showed appreciation for accomplishments verbally, through grading and through constructive criticism. One subject stated:

> ...she called everything I did masterpieces!

4. Teaching Methods

Five subjects made reference to the teaching methods employed. Comments included the development of logical thinking, the reading of specific material, the style of teaching, the atmosphere provided that allowed creativity to "come out," and the mastery of the classroom. One subject commented:

> I had an algebra teacher I looked up to. He had a sense of humor, the sense of knowledge of the subject. I just looked up to him because he was the master of the classroom. I wanted to emulate him.

Eight subjects credited friends/peers with offering support. Three subjects listed employers, and three subjects listed feedback from other people. Other areas of support indicated by at least one subject included a cultural home, love, the neighborhood

in which the person was raised and, when a teenager, coming up with answers to parents' financial problems.

Fifteen subjects (17%) stated either that no one had helped them to develop their creative ability and/or listed themselves or something about themselves that had been a contributing factor. Eight subjects either specified "no one" or implied through their comments that they thought no one encouraged their creativity. Five of the eight explained their position. Comments are as follows:

> ...I always had a desire to survive--like in the woods, and depend on no one but myself.
>
> ...I don't really require any external appreciation from anyone. The kind of appreciation I get is from myself. I don't wait on someone else's appreciation or non-appreciation--it doesn't matter to me whether they like it or not. If I like it, that's the only thing that's important. I believe in myself. Other people may have doubts about me, but I do not.
>
> ...I always wanted to write since I can remember as a child...
>
> ...in fact subtle and direct obstacles were constantly placed to prevent the creative process. Parents, peers, teachers and the educational process militates against creative attitudes or freedom of thought. Creativity is equated with rebellion and radicalism. Ridicule from all levels is the constant companion of the creative process.
>
> ...I wanted to pursue personal goals.

Those subjects who specified no one had helped them develop creatively but suggested aspects of their own personality as factors encouraging this creativity mentioned success experiences, being exposed to new situations and ideas, an "inferiority complex" that required morale boosting statements, "motivated to find out what I'm mentally capable of," positive reinforcement, and experiencing success. One subject stated:

> I was successful early and I learned to deal with failure early. Failure does not frighten me. I discovered that I was different. I have no desire to be part of the mob. I don't define my success or failure in terms of other people's opinions. I know very clearly who I am and what I want.

Discussion

The results of this analysis seem to substantiate the early thoughts of Alex Osborne (1963) that intimates can encourage best. He wrote:

> ...within a family, praise is at its greatest premium. Parents should stop, look, and listen before ever uttering the slightest discouragement of a child's creative efforts... for all of us, a good rule is always to encourage ideas--to encourage speaking up as well as thinking up... (p. 52).

In addition to substantiating Osborne's position through the large number of subjects crediting family members with a mentoring relationship, the study provides some evidence as to the kinds of tasks or behaviors performed by the mentor in the family. While this kind of information is not particularly new, it appears to have some validity in that the behaviors were identified by creative people themselves as they saw the mentoring relationship affecting the development of their creativity. This may be helpful to parents in designing ways to encourage their children to develop their creative ability. The analysis may have been more useful had all subjects been pressed to elaborate further on the specific behaviors of the family mentor.

The role of the mentor as it relates to teachers/educators appears to go beyond the teaching act into more supportive kinds of behaviors. Extended study in this area using a greater population and more extensive elaboration appears to be in order.

The results of this analysis suggest that friends and peers are less likely to act in ways suggestive of the mentor relationship than are family members and teachers. Had subjects been pressed beyond their initial response to this question. perhaps more credit would have been given to friends and/or peers. Certainly for those few subjects listing a friend and/or a peer, the relationship is a valuable one. However, further analysis of more subjects may reveal that the impact of the friend/peer relationship in encouraging one's creative ability is not so great as we would suppose it to be.

Some of the subjects crediting "no one" with encouraging their creative ability appear to have strong internal mechanicisms for keeping their creative ability alive. Some of them may have an abundance of those abilities necessary for creativity to develop; and, as a result, find their creative ability almost indestructible. Or if pressed further, would these subjects verify a mentor relationship?

This study made no attempt to correlate the creative person's realm of expertise with the mentor specified. Does the creative person give credit to a mentor closely akin to his/her own area of creative endeavor? Another question not explored in this study is that of the male/female relationship to the mentor. Are males/females more likely to identify members of their own sex as mentors? An analysis of these questions may be helpful in further identifying the mentor relationship.

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